

0180

Learning cultures in the retail sector: apprenticeships, emotional labour and identity in England and Germany

Michaela Brockmann

University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom

Background

Studies on school-to-work transition have grappled with the role of structure and agency, often stressing the importance of one over the other. Outcomes of transitions in terms of post-compulsory pathways are commonly explained in terms of individualisation, or, more commonly, socialisation. Similarly, research on young people's experiences of work-based learning has focused on the reproduction of social class through processes of selection and self-selection, stressing the structuring force of organisational and occupational identity. There is now a sizeable body of research on young people's construction of identity within particular learning environments (e.g. Bates, 1993; James and Biesta, 2007). Drawing on situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), the concept of a 'learning culture' has been useful in exploring the ways in which learning opportunities are shaped by social contexts and the actors, such as tutors and learners, within it (James and Biesta, 2007). However, young people's agency is conceived as highly constrained and predetermined by their social background in their quest to conform to desired forms of behaviour. All too often these studies have neglected the rich biographical experiences of young people and, thus, the complexity of the processes of identity construction. Lacking an adequate account of identity formation, they often only superficially and selectively consider past events, disregarding wider social contexts and relationships.

Research Questions

The paper is based on an ethnographic study of apprentices in retail and vehicle maintenance in England and Germany designed to explore young people's perceptions of themselves as learners (their learner identities) over time and in relation to particular learning cultures. A particular focus is on the relationship between the social identity of occupations and pathways, governing ideas of what and how apprentices are expected to learn, and the ways in which young people actively negotiate their self-identities.

The present paper will focus on the experiences of retail apprentices in the different learning environments in England and Germany. In the context of what are commonly regarded low-skilled service sector employees, the literature has emphasised the importance of so-called 'soft' skills, particularly in terms of 'emotional labour' (Bolton, 2004; Hochschild, 1979) and more recently 'aesthetic labour' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). The paper will explore the extent to which the skill of emotion management is part of the apprenticeship programme, that is, the extent to which it is acknowledged and developed through VET. The Anglo-German comparison will be illuminating. The comprehensive nature of the German dual system in terms of the breadth of knowledge and skills contrasts with the minimalist apprenticeships of English supermarkets which are entirely work-based.

The study explores the ways in which young people co-construct their learner identities within the particular learning cultures of retail apprenticeships, and the meaning they attach to learning in the context of their individual biographical experiences. In particular, it will look at how young people interpret the demands of emotional and aesthetic labour, how they deal with the pressures and contradictions posed by the interaction rituals of retail environments, and at the role of learning and knowledge in the construction of learner identity.

Methods

The study adopts an ethnographic approach. It is based on four apprentices per course per country (a total of 16). The focus of analysis will be individual case studies of apprentices. The research centres on biographical interviews with apprentices and is complemented by participant observation in colleges and in the workplace. Participant observation is an essential part of ethnographic approaches, fostering shared social understanding (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). However, it is concerned with communicated, outwardly discernible meaning and gives little insight into individually created meanings.

Importantly, and in contrast to previous work, the study adopts a biographical approach (Wengraf, 2001). Part of the tradition of life course research and symbolic interactionism, the biographical approach recognises the interrelated nature of individual action and social contexts. It enables us to explore the ways in which individuals construct their identities over time, as a continuous process of meaning-making (Alheit, 2002). Biography is 'constituted' in the sense that current experiences are always linked to past ones. At the same time, young people generate meanings in diverse social contexts and are able to reflexively re-negotiate identities or dispositions.

Frame

In exploring the ways in which young people comply with, resist or subvert learning cultures, and how they perform the role of retail assistant, the study draws on theories of identity formation, including identity as performativity (Butler, 1990) and impression management (Goffman, 1969). At the same time, and in line with the biographical perspective, learning as part of identity construction is seen as a lifelong process, something referred to as 'biographical learning' (Alheit, 2002).

Research findings

The research will provide an insight into young people's experiences of and expectations towards learning and the strategies they develop for adapting to and shaping the learning culture in the particular context of retail apprenticeships. The retail sector is of particular significance as it is at the centre of the current UK government's drive to increase the capacity of apprenticeship as part of improving the rate of participation in compulsory education. In particular, the study seeks to illuminate the role of emotional labour and the meanings afforded to it by young people in the overall process of identity formation.

The study will go beyond narrow conceptions of occupational or organisational identity by exploring the processes of identity construction as young people negotiate multiple identities, moving in a variety of social contexts. It will compare young people's construction of biography in the context of the highly regulated, high-status dual system in Germany with the flexible, weakly regulated system of apprenticeship in England.

It will provide insights into: the ways in which young people engage with or disengage from learning; how they resist, reinforce or transform organisational and occupational identities; and how particular dispositions develop over time and in different contexts - in young people's childhood, in the contexts of their family homes, their schools and their peer groups, and in different learning environments.